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SUBJECT: Cuenca's Leaders Foresee Correa Victory

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Cuenca's political, media, religious and business leaders told visiting Guayaquil Consul General that Rafael Correa would win the upcoming presidential elections. Few of the leaders we spoke with believe that Correa would necessarily pursue the radical policies on which he is campaigning. If he were to, they warned that his tenure would be short, as either the military or business elite would step in to force him out. Although Ecuador's third largest city is traditionally a stronghold of the Democratic Left Party (ID), currently in alliance with Leon Roldos, provincial leaders asserted that Roldos's campaign was falling flat. Correa's campaign's emphasis on change resonates with voters, and his opponents appear incapable of clearly communicating their vision for Ecuador. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) From September 18 to 20, the Consul General and Conoff visited Cuenca, capital of the province of Azuay, to pay courtesy calls on key government officials, media contacts, business leaders and heads of prominent local universities. The upcoming national elections in October were on the minds of nearly all interlocutors, who willingly offered their views on the campaign and the candidates.

CUENCA'S OFFICIALS UNANIMOUS: "CORREA WILL WIN"

¶3. (U) Nearly all interlocutors in Cuenca agreed that Correa will likely win the presidential elections in October. According to Paul Carrasco, ID prefect of the province of Azuay and self-proclaimed friend of Correa, "People are looking for something different, and Correa is offering it to them." Azuay Governor Pedro Vintimilla, a non-career politician with a business background, agreed. "People are tired of the same faces," he added. Most believed that Correa would win in the second round, but Jorge Piedra Ledesma, Vice Mayor of Cuenca and former member of the ID party (now independent), went a step further, declaring that Correa would win by such a large margin in the first round that a second balloting would not be necessary.

¶4. (U) Representatives from the Ecuadorian-American Chamber of Commerce in Cuenca said Correa's and charisma and connection with voters' concerns are putting him ahead of Roldos and Viteri. "Correa is saying what people want to hear," said Pedro Jerves Ramirez, President of the Chamber. "Viteri and Roldos have supporters, but they're not offering solutions." Adriano Vintimilla, Director of the Telerama TV station added, "Correa is a more marketable product."

IF RADICAL, HE MAY NOT GOVERN FOR LONG

¶5. (U) Though resigned to a Correa victory, few of our contacts envision stability for a Correa government, if elected. Pedro Vintimilla pointed to several perceived weakness, saying, "He has no

plan, no team and no party. Congress will not work with him." Adriano Vintimilla highlighted the last point, adding, "The institution of president is not so strong here. With no allies in Congress, Correa would have to dissolve it." Carrasco was blunter. "He will not last six months if he pursues his platform," the prefect stated.

¶16. (U) Given the challenges that Correa would face in his first year, many in Cuenca believed that he is saying only what is necessary to get elected and that his policies may change after the elections. Several interlocutors opined that, despite his reputation, Correa is less revolutionary than Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. "He is definitely not a Chavista," said Piedra Ledesma. Monseor Vicente Cisneros Duran, Archbishop of Cuenca, added that, unlike Chavez, Correa has courted the support of the Catholic Church. "He is not like [former Peruvian leftist presidential candidate Ollanta] Humala," said Carrasco. "I think he will change focus [i.e., become more moderate] during the second round of the elections."

¶17. (U) COMMENT: Azuay is an anomaly in Ecuador--an ID stronghold strongly in favor of free trade. The main reason ID leaders in Cuenca may be so pessimistic about Roldos' chances, even while local polling by two major newspapers shows Roldos leading voter preferences in Azuay, probably relates to Correa's effective positioning as the candidate for radical change. Azuay has always resented the concentration of national political power in Quito and Guayaquil, and voters there may hope Correa will shift the balance. Another reason could be simmering tensions within the ID in Azuay, which was divided over whether to support Roldos. Regardless, Cuenca's ID political leaders appear resigned to a Correa win. The belief that Correa would be more pragmatic as president than on the campaign trail strikes us as wishful thinking, a sentiment shared by many of the center left.

GRIFFITHS